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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether replacing race-based affirmative action admissions programs in higher education institutions with class-based programs would continue to assist minorities yet have the added benefit of helping poor and working class whites. Three National Center for Education Statistics longitudinal databases were examined to assess the potential effects of such a shift in policy. Class was defined as socioeconomic status, a composite variable that combined income, parental education, and parental occupation. The paper finds that the argument supporting class-based affirmation action policies to achieve racial diversity is not supported. Although there is a statistically significant, but weak and declining, association between race and socioeconomic status, it was found that low socioeconomic status whites would disproportionately benefit from a class-based policy, as compared to low socioeconomic status minority peers, because of sheer numbers and over-representation. (Contains approximately 60 references.) (CH)

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The Relationship between Race and Socioeconomic Status (SES): Implications for Institutional Research and Admissions Policies[1]

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The Relationship between Race and Socioeconomic Status (SES): Implications for Institutional Research and Admissions Policies

Abstract

This study examined whether replacing race-based affirmative action admissions programs with class-based programs, will continue assisting minorities with the added benefit of helping poor and working class Whites. Three NCES national databases were examined to assess the potential effects of such a shift in policy. The claim that a class-based affirmative action policy would assist, if not improve, college participation rates among minorities was not supported. A statistically significant, but weak and declining, association between race and socioeconomic status was noted. Furthermore, low SES Whites would disproportionately benefit from a class-based policy, compared to their low SES minority peers, because of sheer numbers and overrepresentation. Altogether, these findings are in clear contradiction with the best hopes of class-based programs advocates. The authors suggest that race-based and class-based programs are two different issues not likely to be resolved by a single policy.

The Relationship between Race and Socioeconomic Status (SES): Implications for Institutional Research and Admissions Policies

The search for equity in higher education has been debated in policy and research for decades (Olivas, 1997). While disagreement remains as to specific intervention strategies (St. John, Simmons & Musoba, 1999), programs ranging from the federal to the institutional levels seek to eliminate deterrents to equal educational opportunities for all able and willing individuals. One such strategy has been the use of race-based affirmative action, relying on the legal support of the 1978 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* decision, which allowed for race to be used as a "plus factor" when admitting new students. (e.g., Trent, 1991; Gladieux, 1996; Kahlenberg, 1996; Olivas, 1997; Bowen & Bok, 1998).

In order to redress the effects of past discrimination and foster a diverse campus community, higher education administrators and policymakers have designed affirmative action admissions policies, including more comprehensive admissions criteria, focused recruitment, information-sharing, assistance in the application process, and targeted financial aid (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Goggin, 1999; Trent, 1991). These affirmative efforts to correct minority underrepresentation were deemed necessary until recent claims they had already achieved their purpose (Connerly, 2000). Race, some argue, is no longer the relevant measure of disadvantage for students desiring to enter postsecondary education (e.g., Greve, 1999; Wilson, 1980 [1978]; Kahlenberg, 1996).

Debates over the legal standing of *Bakke* (e.g. Greve, 1999; Olivas, 1997, Selmi, 1999), in combination with eroding public and political support for using race-based affirmative action in college admissions, have sent administrators and policymakers scrambling for race-neutral

ways to continue established institutional missions of equity and diversity. Alternative methods of college admissions include class-based affirmative action, guaranteeing college admission based on high school graduation ranks -ranging from 4% (Texas) to 20% (Florida)- (Healy, 1999; Selingo, 2000) and merit-aware[3] (Goggin, 1999; St. John, Simmons & Musoba, 1999a, 1999b). Chief among alternative policies is class-based affirmative action (e.g., Kahlenberg, 1996), primarily because of its promise to continue expanding opportunities for racial/ethnic minorities:

> The reason for embracing economically based affirmative action is tactical only—to preserve as many of the benefits of race-based affirmative action as it is practically possible to preserve in an adverse environment (Fallon, 1996).

Class-based affirmative action is projected to continue, if not increase, benefits for minorities who are disproportionately from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, while expanding opportunities for needy Whites. Under this scenario, low socioeconomic status, as the measure of disadvantage, will broaden access to higher education. Most importantly, a class-based policy is deemed to avoid the present legal and political challenges to race-based policies while preventing the polarization of public opinion (Kahlenberg, 1996).

The purpose of this study is to examine whether the expectations of class-based affirmative action policies will continue to address established racial/ethnic diversity higher education goals[4]. Specifically, we will analyze national education data to see if replacing race-based affirmative action admissions programs with class-based programs will continue assisting

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3 Merit-aware index adjusts a student's scores on standardized tests in relation to the average score of his/her high school. Under this approach, college eligibility would be granted to those scoring above the high school mean. See St. John, Simmons & Musoba (1999b) for a comprehensive assessment of this index.

4 For a discussion of the need to focus on diversity missions and outcomes, instead of past discrimination, as the

minorities with the added benefit of helping poor and working class Whites.

Literature Review

Wilson (1980[1978], 1987, 1996) was among the first to systematically question the necessity of race-based affirmative action programs, arguing that the significance of race was declining in terms of socioeconomic disadvantage. According to Wilson, the success of the Black middle-class, however tenuous their economic status (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995) or continued dealings with discrimination (Feagin & Sikes, 1994), is a sign of the positive results of race-based policies. However, the very existence of middle- to upper-class Black families is proof that race-based affirmative action is no longer necessary, or even beneficial to the truly disadvantaged—poor minorities. He advocates programs serving those in most economic need--namely those living in poverty. Furthermore, Wilson feared that race-based affirmative action was coming under attack from a backlash to targeted programs in general.

Although controversial, Wilson's work gained currency in political and public opinion circles, giving rise to initiatives challenging race as a measure of disadvantage. By 1996, a series of court rulings and statewide ballot initiatives had banned or severely limited the use of racial preferences in admissions and hiring decisions in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, California, Washington, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Puerto Rico (Healy, 1998a, 1998b, 1999). Constraints on the use of race among admissions criteria have led to support for class-based affirmative action as an alternative. Changes in the University of California admissions system (e.g., Kahlenberg, 1996, p. 123) all the way to the public support of

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basis for supporting affirmative action programs of any kind, see Alger, 1998a.

its constitutionality by Supreme Court Justices Scalia, O'Connor, and Thomas (Kahlenberg, 1996, p. 109) reflect class-based affirmative action's growing popularity.

Kahlenberg (1996) articulates a convincing case for implementing class-based affirmative action policies, a solution he calls *The Remedy*. He elaborates a three-fold argument: 1) providing genuine equal opportunity for those in most need, regardless of race; 2) compensating for past racial discrimination towards those it has affected most-- namely poor minorities—thus, creating natural, color-blind integration; and 3) proactively redesigning affirmative before the inevitable end of race- and gender-based policies under legal and political attack. In short, Kahlenberg suggests the use of socioeconomic status, instead of race, as the cornerstone for new affirmative action and equal opportunity programs.

Replacing race with class in the design of new affirmative action efforts seems to be a win-win situation. Needy minorities should continue to benefit while genuine equal opportunity will be extended to needy Whites. Because minorities are more likely to be from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds, class-based affirmative action proponents project an increase in minority enrollments, particularly among those truly deserving of such consideration. Implicit in the expectations of class-based approaches is a high correlation between race and SES. This presumption, although yet untested, is essential to support the belief that class-based approaches address similar issues as race-based approaches but in a more equitable and less polarizing manner (e.g., Heller, 1997; Kahlenberg, 1996).

This study examines the effects of implementing a class-based affirmative action admissions policy on postsecondary enrollment. First, we analyze the degree of association between race and SES among high school and postsecondary students. Second, we project

potential enrollment trends if a shift from race to socioeconomic status is implemented--specifically whether it maintains or increases minority and low SES White enrollments.

Methodology

To examine the viability of a class-based policy in continuing or increasing minority representation in higher education, data from three National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) longitudinal databases were analyzed:

> National Longitudinal Study of 1972 (NLS-72). One group was examined: first year college students (N=1,568,214). The weight WT28 was used to create a representative sample of college students. In addition TRIFA, a variable based on college transcripts, was used to determine the true institution of first attendance after high school graduation. No high school graduating class group was created. Our version of the NLS-72 data did not enable identification of the true high school completion date.
>
> High School and Beyond, 1980 (HS&B:82, Sophomore Cohort). Two groups within the HSB dataset were examined: high school seniors who graduated by 1982 (weighted N= 3,113,159) and 1983 first-year college students (weighted N= 2,110,359), employing appropriate weights, in accordance with Adelman's (1999) procedures, for pre-collegiate (RAWWT) and collegiate background (PSEWT1). In addition, postsecondary students were included based on verifiable college transcripts.
>
> National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1998-94 (NELS:88). Two groups were examined in the NELS dataset: high school students who graduated by 1992 (weighted N= 2,356,268) and 1994 first-year college students (weighted N=1,590,865), using the panel weight F3QWT92G. This weight adjusts the NELS:88 data base to reflect the number in the population who received a high school diploma between September 1, 1991 and August 31, 1992.

To operationalize class[5], we examined several different definitions of economic class throughout sociological and educational literature. One common method is to rely on family income data. These data are typically self-reported, although on rare occasions financial aid records are used for verification. The incomes are then divided into intervals, often arbitrarily defined. For example, choosing an income number that *appears* low. Or, they can follow low-income definitions advanced by the U.S. Census Bureau; for example, using poverty thresholds.

Another method of defining low-income status uses multiple measures to create an index of wealth, typically referred to as socioeconomic status (SES). Adelman (1998) points to the problematic nature of using income as the sole indicator of family wealth, especially when the data are self-reported. Research contrasting student's self-reported income data against parental reported income supports this observation. Fetters, Stowe, and Owins (1984), while examining the quality of responses from high school students to questionnaire items, found low levels of agreement between students and parents regarding family income and parental occupation. However, they reported high validity coefficients when income, parental education, and parental occupation were combined into a single indicator: socioeconomic status. Likewise, Adelman (1998) found that a single SES composite variable "washes out some (but not all) of the potential distorting effects of contradictions, anomalies, and outliers in its component parts" (p. 23). Fetters and associates' results, combined with Adelman's analyses, support using single composites that merge measures of family educational and occupational attainment and status.

For the purposes of this study, SES was used instead of raw income data for analysis.

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5 Malamud (1997) fears that class-based affirmative action policies will fail to address economic inequality if they rely on current measures of SES. On her opinion current operationalizations of class are oversimplified, especially because they do not index major wealth components, namely ownership of assets and intergenerational transmission of class.

Socioeconomic status, as defined by variables within NCES datasets, includes the following measures: parental education, parental occupation, items in the home (i.e., dishwasher, books, etc.), and family income.

Analyses

The core of the case for class-based affirmative action admissions policies rests on two assumptions. First, minority enrollments will remain steady, if not increase, because minorities are disproportionately poor. Second, discrimination will be better addressed by a class-based policy because socioeconomic attainment or lack thereof, is the by-product of that discrimination. Data reveal strong evidence for such expected outcomes *when examining the proportion of people from low SES within race*. For instance, in 1995, the General Accounting Office noted "[m]inorities are overrepresented among low-income families...." According to the US Census Bureau, 1990 Black median family income was 58% of Whites'.

When we examined the distribution of minorities in the lowest SES strata who graduated from high school and postsecondary attendees during the periods of 1982/83 and 1992/94 (see Table 1), we reached similar conclusions: minorities are indeed disproportionately from low-SES backgrounds. For example, in 1982, more than half of African American and Latino high school students were low SES in sharp contrast with 24% of Whites (See Table 1, HSB). In 1992, the trend continues with 40% of African Americans and 52% of Latinos from low SES compared to 18% of Whites. High school data, in combination with national income inequality data, appear to support the notion that "race may be a proxy for income" (Heller, 1997, p. 643).

Table 1. Distribution of Low SES students within Race/Ethnicity.

Race/Ethnicity	NLS-72	HSB 1982/83		NELS 1992/94	
	Post Secondary	High School	Post secondary	High School	Post Secondary
Native Americans	30.7%	46.6%	45.9%	25.8%	11.7%
Asian Americans	17.3%	35.7%	33.0%	14.8%	13.9%
Latino/Hispanics	50.5%	54.7%	43.5%	43.9%	35.9%
African Americans	45.9%	54.7%	43.9%	35.3%	30.1%
Whites	8.4%	23.9%	16.2%	12.7%	6.9%

When we examined the association between race and SES, both in high school and postsecondary education, we found it to be statistically significant but rather weak (See Table 2). Across the three national databases encompassing three decades of students, the positive, significant association never surpasses 7% of shared variance between SES and race/ethnicity. In high school, the highest correlation was found among the 1982 high school cohort (4% shared variance) and the lowest among 1992 high school seniors (3% shared variance). At the postsecondary level, the highest correlation was found in the 1972 cohort (7% shared variance) and lowest in the 1992 cohort (4% shared variance). In sum, at least 93% of variance in either SES or race is left unexplained. This small association, which has declined steadily over time, signifies that race is, at best, a weak predictor of socioeconomic status and vice versa.

Table 2. Distribution of Race/Ethnicity within Low SES.

Race/Ethnicity	NELS-72	HSB 1982/83		NELS 1992/94	
	Post Secondary	High School	Post secondary	High School	Post Secondary
Low SES Students Within Cohort	13.0%	30.3%	21.6%	18.1%	11.8%
Native Americans	1.4%	1.8%	2.0%	1.3%	0.7%
Asian Americans	1.6%	1.7%	3.0%	3.2%	5.2%
Latino/Hispanics	11.7%	12.5%	11.6%	21.8%	24.3%
African Americans	28.9%	22.5%	23.6%	20.1%	24.5%
Whites	56.3%	61.4%	59.8%	53.6%	45.3%
Correlation	.268**	.206**	.222**	.179**	.194**
Shared Variance	7.2%	4.2%	4.9%	3.2%	3.8%

** $p < .001$

Table 2 reveals why the association is not strong. The practice of examining SES within race masks the sheer numbers of Whites who are low SES. Whites outnumber racial/ethnic minorities in each SES quartile. Among Whites, the proportion who are low SES never exceeds 21% (See Table 1); however, they comprise between 45%-61% (Table 2) of low SES students. Class-based affirmative action admissions projections, based on the most recent high school graduation data (see Table 2, column 6), should yield 52 Whites, 22 African Americans, 22 Latinos, 2 Asian Americans, and 2 Native Americans out of 100 affirmative action admits. These projections assume the best-case scenario in which all low SES high school graduates are able and willing to attend college.

Once college qualifications are taken into account, the likelihood that a class-based affirmative action policy would disproportionably benefit ethnic minorities all but disappears. The proportion of Whites meeting the class-based affirmative action increases from 52% to 56% while the proportion of minority class-based admits declines from 48% to 44% once college-

qualifications are considered (see Table 3).

Table 3. Percentage of college-qualified lowest-SES 1992 high school graduates[6]

Race/Ethnicity	College-Qualified
Native Americans	0.8%
Asian Americans	4.0%
Latino/Hispanics	23.0%
African Americans	16.1%
Whites	56.1%

The 1990's high school to postsecondary education data (see Table 2, columns 5 & 6) show that low SES Whites, have not fared well-- dropping approximately 8 percentage points between high school and college participation. Hence, concern that low SES Whites are having difficulties making the transition to college is founded. Low SES minorities are close to parity, or slightly overrepresented in, high school to postsecondary participation rates.

Conclusions & Implications

People will continue to debate the moral, ethical, and philosophical issues behind equal opportunity, the value of affirmative action for any group, or the importance of a racially diversified student body. These debates are older than the nation itself (Zinn, 1995). However, the argument that a class-based affirmative action policy will achieve racial diversity is empirically debatable.

A vicious cycle of misconceptualization has led to the acceptance of an untested paradigm-- race and SES being highly correlated, even interchangeable at times (i.e., General

6 Developed by Berkner and Chavez (1997), the college-qualification index approximates college admissions criteria by collapsing cumulative academic course GPA, senior class rank, aptitude test scores, and the SAT and ACTS scores. Berkner and Chavez found just meeting minimal college qualifications significantly predicts college enrollment.

Accounting Office, 1995; Kahlenberg, 1996; Stampen & Fenske, 1988). Results show that using SES will neither maintain nor increase racial/ethnic diversity. The problem with a class-based policy as a viable substitute for a race-based affirmative action policy lies in numbers. Bowen & Bok (1998) said it best:

> ***While Blacks and other minorities are much more likely than whites to come from poor families, they still make up a minority of all college-age Americans with low incomes*** *(p. 47).*

These results do not question the validity of eliminating inability to pay as a barrier to college attendance. Higher education has been operating with a class-based policy: *financial aid.* Over the past 30 years, federal and state governments have invested considerable human and financial resources to achieve equality of access to and persistence in college. The federally funded Talent Search Program, for example, seeks to facilitate college choice among low-income high school students by identifying talented youths and providing them and their families with various forms of support and information. Since the passage of the Higher Education Amendments of 1965, a variety of federal, state, and institutional student aid programs have emerged to eliminate inability to pay as a barrier to postsecondary enrollment and the benefits associated with college attendance and degree completion (Olivas, 1985; St. John, 1994; Stampen & Cabrera, 1988). In the early 1980's, the cost of these programs reached nearly $20 billion per year (Lewis, 1989). By 1997, the tab for federally supported student aid programs had reached $40.1 billion, a jump of 100% (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1998). The level of funding for such programs reflects the hopes they embody-- removing inability-to-pay as a barrier and increasing opportunities for low-income students (Hannah, 1996; Heller, 1997).

Also, our results indicate a substantial decline in the high school graduation and college

participation rates among the lowest SES students. In 1982, 30% of high school graduates were low SES compared to 25% in 1992, a drop of 5% in ten years. College participation rates also dropped from 22% in 1983 to 13% in 1994, a decline of 9% in eleven years. These drops correlate with increasing college costs coupled with TRIO and Head Start program cutbacks and shifting financial aid emphases from grants to loans experienced since the early 1980s (Lewis, 1989). These drops are also consistent with research showing low-SES students' decisions to attend college being highly sensitive to increases in tuition and/or changes in student aid packages from grants to loans (Heller, 1996; Olivas, 1985, 1986; St. John, 1994; Windham, 1984).

Dropping educational attainment gaps may have spurred the concern to create more opportunities for low SES students, particularly for disenfranchised Whites, by rejecting race-based affirmative action programs in favor of class-based. Focusing on affirmative action to help low SES students distracts policymakers from the most obvious intervention arena— financial aid policies and programs. Further research analyzing the effects of financial aid policy changes may enlighten our understanding of low SES access to higher education without confusing inability to pay with issues of race and discrimination.

Race and SES are not interchangeable. The low association between SES and race/ethnicity renders the latter as an impractical device to achieve racial diversity in postsecondary education. Questioning the validity of SES as a substitute of race is a conclusion largely consistent with the one reached by Olivas (1997) when he examined postsecondary admission cases; namely, "[t]here is no good proxy, no more narrowly tailored criterion, no statistical treatment that can replace race" (p. 1095).

Race-based affirmative action and class-based financial aid address two different issues. One is concerned with removing inability to pay as a barrier to equal educational opportunities. The other seeks to achieve representation and equal opportunities previously denied specifically because of race/ethnicity (Olivas, 1997). Both are essential to maintaining a vibrant campus life and affording all students new learning experiences (Alger, 1998a, 1998b; Bowen & Bok, 1998; Chang, 1996; Smith, et al., 1997). Eliminating one, race-based programs, in favor of the other, class-based programs, will not help the problem. When race-based and class-based programs exist in tandem representation among low SES students of ***all*** races is achieved.

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